

God of Emptiness (Sample)

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Hörður jerks in his seat, throws his left hand against the door and his right onto the wheel, kicks his feet and simultaneously strikes his head against the roof of the car and one knee against the dashboard.

It is still dark outside, despite it being eight in the morning. The autumn night is long and cold, but on the horizon a deep-blue dawn kindles beneath a waning moon.

He blinks, gasps, and flails around with his hands as if trying to prevent himself from falling.

Inside the parked vehicle it is silent and icy-cold.

When he finally realizes where he is in time and space he feels both relieved and embarrassed. He heaves a sigh and relaxes his tense muscles, shakes his shoulders and adjusts his position in the driver's seat. His gestures are clumsy in the relatively tight space. The leather seat creaks; the car's superstructure rocks lazily and a soft scraping sounds escapes from the undercarriage.

The vehicle is a jeep, Ford Explorer, pitch-black, with tinted side windows. It is in an inconspicuous spot on a large, paved parking lot, near two empty family cars. The Explorer is a sturdy and spacious SUV, although it scarcely seems larger than a Japanese compact car after Hörður has packed himself into it.

He clears his throat softly, exhales a cloud of frosty breath, and glances quickly at the woman sitting in the passenger seat.

"Did you fall asleep?" she asks with a grin, the slender braces on her teeth glinting.

The temperature inside the vehicle is approaching zero and each time they open their mouths, frosty breath streams from them.

"No, no. Not really. Dozed off a bit, maybe," he mutters, sticking a match in his mouth. "How long have we been waiting?"

She looks at her watch. "Twenty minutes."

He looks out the front window at a double security fence of wire mesh, barbed wire, and green iron poles, three meters high, inclined on top and with a high voltage electric current on the inner surface. "I'm sure they'll be letting him out soon."

"Yes." She looks out the window on the passenger side toward the powerful iron gate, lit with intense floodlights front and back. The gate is a large blue frame with double grated iron doors, high and wide enough for a small-size tractor-trailer to drive through. Left of the main gate is a low turnstile for pedestrians, white with a little roof, constructed of stout iron bars, enclosed by wire mesh and barbwire, locked tight and monitored by cameras.

On the other side of the gate, inside the security fence, stands a row of white buildings in an otherwise empty area. The buildings are all lit by spotlights; in them are small, dark windows and rising from the top of the newest of them is a dark blue guard tower. In the middle is the oldest building, an old and stately stone house with a gable roof:

Building 2.

East of Building 2 are Buildings 3 and 4.

A low rectangle and then a long four-story block, both cement, sharply defined and cold. On top of Building 4 is a guard tower looking out in all directions.

West of Building 2 is Building 1:

A low, plain extension, half-buried and almost completely door- and windowless.

The area inside as well as outside the security fence is barren and over it rests a silent numbness; the fence itself is comfortingly menacing and the four buildings have a heavy, official air that is both serious and depressing.

In summary:

Little Hraun Prison.

“Þóra?” he says after a brief silence. He grabs the wheel with giant hands covered in psoriasis rashes, sighs and looks to the right.

“Yes?” she asks, as they look each other in the eye.

Þóra is short and thin, just turned thirty but she looks at most to be twenty-five. Her head is small and her face round, like a full moon. Her mouth is narrow but her lips thick and luscious. Her nose is tiny, while her chestnut-colored eyes are large and childish, at once intelligent and wry, framed by the clunky rims of her glasses. She wears no makeup and has a freckled nose; her complexion is pale, but not white, her mousy hair carefully brushed back at her neck and tied in a long tail that disappears into the neckline of her hooded, furry-collared white down jacket.

She is pretty and charming in her shy and unassuming way and has a mischievous attractiveness that makes up for her obvious lack of fashionable sexiness. She is this uncouth high-school type, a smart girl who is good at sports and has more interest in books than clothes, boys, or a social life.

“You don’t have to take part in this investigation, if you don’t want to,” he says with a deep, fatherly voice that is supposed to show his concern, but is actually arrogant.

“What do you mean?” Þóra’s eyes open wide. “Should I just wait in the car? Maybe you should just get yourself a dog?”

Hörður blushes. “I didn’t mean it like that. This is all just a bit far-fetched and if nothing comes out of it, it won’t look good on your CV, see?”

“Don’t worry about that. Very few of that type of inquiries lead to investigations, let alone charges. You already know that.”

He sighs heavily. “Yeah, I know it best of all. But the boss could easily argue that I’m on a witch-hunt. He could tell us to forget it and toss the report straight in the shredder. Or hand over the case to someone else.”

“Would that be a crime? To put someone else on the case, I mean? That would increase its credibility in the court’s eyes. Otherwise the defense could put the witch-hunt spin on the case. It wouldn’t look good for the prosecution.”

Hörður chews the match sulkily and squeezes the steering wheel as if he were driving at full speed. “This is my case. I’ve put a lot of work into it. I’m the right person to see it to the end. I want to nail the bastard. No one gets to snatch that pleasure out of my hands.”

“Okay, relax,” says Þóra with a wry smile. “But I think the boss will stand with us in this. Otherwise he wouldn’t have given this little operation a green light. Am I right?”

“Yes, exactly. Speaking of which,” mutters Hörður, clearing his throat.

“He *knows* we’re here, doesn’t he?” She looks at him like a mother trying to make eye contact with a naughty child.

“No, he doesn’t actually,” he mutters, half-grinning, half-shamefaced.

Now it’s Þóra who sighs. “Don’t tell me we’re here without permission?”

“No, no, absolutely not.” He shakes his head for extra emphasis. “I called the Iron Lady a few days ago and cleared it up with her. She responded well, being a classy dame who knows how to run a prison and knows her boys, outside as well as behind bars.”

“But the boss?” She opens her handbag, a light-colored leather pouch with a long strap, fishes a container of lip-balm from it, opens the container, sticks her little finger into it and puts a bit of the menthol-scented balm on her lips.

“No.” He lets go of the steering wheel and runs his hands along his thighs. “I’ll tell him later. *If* something comes out of this, that is.”

“He’s not going to like it,” says Þóra with a worried look. “He’s not going to like it *at all*.”

“It depends on what we come up with. But maybe now you understand what I meant earlier. You don’t need to take part. I can sign the report myself. We’ll just say you weren’t feeling well today or something. It isn’t necessary to back yourself into a corner because of... you know.”

“Your witch-hunt?”

“That wasn’t the word that I would have used myself, but yes,” he mutters, biting the match in two before tossing it in the ashtray, which is full of split, broken, and wet matches.

“We’re partners, Hörður. Partners do all kinds of things together. Including stupid things.

He hesitates. “Do you think this is stupid? Should we maybe skip it?”

“No. It’s not a stupid idea. But it would have been better to have discussed it with the boss, that’s all,” she mutters, turning her face to the side window, where a hazy spot forms.

“Okay. I’ll remember that next time,” he says, sniffing. “Damn, it’s cold here!”

“And stop hiding things from me and being *considerate* of me, okay?” says Þóra with a stern look. “I’m your partner. Your equal. Not an invalid or inferior. Not just some *woman*. Understand?”

He clears his throat. “Yes. Sorry. I apologize. You’re a *super*-woman. I forget that sometimes.”

“Shut up, Shrek.” She grins and gives him a nudge.

“Look,” he says, pointing out the passenger window. She turns her face to the window and breathes on it by accident, but wipes the moisture off with the sleeve of her jacket.

The main gate opens slowly and calmly; the grated iron doors withdraw from each other and stand doubled-up at their respective gateposts. Through the wide-open gate and out into freedom walks a thirty-three year-old man, a convicted drug dealer and blackmailer now completing his jail term for two assault convictions:

Simon Örn Rekoja.

He is wearing a yellow Adidas sports’ shirt and black Adidas running shoes and has a dark green duffel bag slung over one shoulder. He stops just outside the gate, turns his shaved head right and left and scrutinizes the parking lot with staring, piercing eyes. His face is emaciated and sunken and in it are deep shadows; his large eyes appear to rattle

loosely in their dark sockets and between his stretched lips shines a row of straight, white teeth.

Due to excessive use of tanning cream he looks mostly like a thousand-year-old mummy.

Simon has a gold chain around his neck, a gold watch on his left wrist and gold rings on several fingers. He is a hundred and eighty-five centimeters tall and carries himself as if he's that wide.

Behind him the mechanical gate starts to close, the grated iron doors unfold, draw closer, and finally slam shut.

"He's been lifting weights," mutters Þóra. "What do you suppose he weighs? A hundred and ten kilos?"

"A hundred and fifteen. At least," mutters Hörður. He looks determinedly at his opponent, weighing him and measuring him in every way.

"Steroids?" asks Þóra.

"Oh, yes," says Hörður. He himself is not innocent when it comes to steroid abuse, but contrary to some, he stopped pumping the rubbish into his body when he started yelling at people for no reason, breaking out in pimples and peeing blood.

Hörður is at least five kilograms heavier than Simon, twenty centimeters taller and a year younger, but numbers, facts, and estimations mean little in the face of an exception that both proves the rule and disproves the results.

The bastard looks like a rhinoceros in a tracksuit. He is a rhinoceros in a tracksuit. A rhinoceros who knows how to fight, is perfectly fearless and merciless and as skeptical of his own excellence as a grizzly bear on cocaine.

Hörður has certainly taken down bigger, stronger, and heavier men than this, but none of those excellent gentlemen was *this*.

Simon is no ordinary bully. He is The Bully. With a capital B and definite article.

From '91 to '93, when Simon was sixteen to eighteen years old, he paid penalties eight times for drug violations and simple assaults. From '93 to '94 he was fined five times for drug and traffic violations and assaults. In 1994, when Simon was twenty, he was sentenced to a two-year suspended jail term for burglary, drug violations, and aggravated assault. Upon its completion he fled to Ísafjörður, where he kept out of trouble for eight months. In 1996 Simon was sentenced to ten months in prison and stripped of his driver's license for one year for forgery, burglary, assault, and traffic and drug violations. In 1999, four men in their twenties were arrested in connection with alleged drug manufacturing in an industrial warehouse in Hafnarfjörður. The premises, which were registered to Simon Örn Rekoja, were discovered to contain more than 38 kilograms of the substance P-2-NP and more than three liters of the substance P-2-P. These materials could have been used to produce 14 kilos of pure amphetamine or methamphetamine, which would have yielded approximately 400 kilos, after cutting, for sale on the street. The prosecution failed to prove that Simon had been aware of the activities that took place on the premises; none of the arrested named Simon as an accomplice and because of this he was released following the hearing. From 2005 to 2006 Simon was stopped and arrested nearly fifty times on suspicion of carrying a concealed weapon and drug violations, and was fined three times for drug possession.

There was never a huge amount involved. At the same time, Simon bought houses and cars and lived large. He was suspected of being the kingpin behind an extensive drug

distribution and sales operation, but these suspicions could not be proven. Late in 2007 Símon was sentenced in District Court to a one-year prison term for two assaults. He appealed to the Supreme Court. In March 2008, the Supreme Court reduced the sentence to nine months after two witnesses changed their testimony in favor of the accused. In May, Símon and his fiancée, María Pétursdóttir, traveled to Colombia. They returned three weeks later. The next day Símon began serving his sentence.

Now, four months later, he is being released for good behavior.

Good behavior is certainly an elastic concept, but in this case it is meaningless, at best. The simple fact of *not* beating someone to a pulp is called good behavior where Símon is concerned.

It has been several years since regular police officers were sent to the scene if there were the least suspicion that Símon might be involved. A special squad assigned to the office of the National Police Commissioner is responsible for dealing with such boors and when it is Símon, no fewer than four officers report and always start by rushing the man, driving him to the ground and cuffing him hand and foot, whether he displays threatening behavior or not.

Experience has long since taught the guardians of the law that it never pays to give Símon Örn Rekoja the benefit of the doubt. Such charity is repaid only with internal injuries, deep gashes and broken bones.

He stands there shuffling his feet on the lot in front of the closed gate, peers with crazy eyes in all directions and breathes out a regular stream of thick icy breath. He has a dark, electric aura; his forehead is sweaty in spite of the cold outside and his nostrils flare out and in, like those of a snuffling dog. He's obviously upset, but tries to hide it by clenching his jaw, stomping his feet and clenching his fists. He is like a ticking time bomb that is so close to exploding that the concussive burst can be heard ahead of time.

Had this former madman from the suburbs been dangerous before, he was now nothing less than menace and terror incarnate.

"Do you think he can see us?" whispers Þóra.

"No," Hörður whispers. "But don't move. Don't blink. Don't even breathe."

They sit side by side in the car, looking in the same direction, moving not a muscle as their breath transforms into a haze that settles on the inside of the windowpanes and blocks their sight.

Suddenly a light hits the windows; they are blinded for a moment and at once hear the low growl of an eight-cylinder car engine. The light moves, wide tires glide over the dry asphalt and the brakes screech. A luxury jeep of the largest and most expensive make pulls into the parking lot. It is a cream-yellow Cadillac Escalade SUV with tinted windows and Xenon headlights, on low-profile radial tires with eighteen-inch chrome rims. This is a three-ton pleasure yacht on wheels, nearly six meters long and two meters wide, equipped with all possible amenities and propelled by a six point two liter, four-hundred horsepower Vortec V8 super engine.

Compared to it, the Explorer is like a military jeep from World War II.

"No lack of style there," says Þóra as she stealthily wipes the haze from the windowpane.

"No kidding," mutters Hörður. He arches his back and thrusts his head forward, like a lion on the prowl. His emerald eyes stare determinedly from beneath his heavy brows; they lie deep and widely set in his highly grooved, pale face.

The luxury jeep stops at an angle in front of the closed gate. Símon opens the passenger door, tosses his duffel bag onto the back seat and then sits down on the beige leather front seat. He shuts the door, the engine growls and the Cadillac sets off effortlessly, sweeps out of the lot and disappears into the morning darkness.

The last thing that they see is the lit custom plate:

SÍMON

“Did you happen to see who was driving?” asks Hörður out of professional curiosity, but with a sharp tone in his voice and a dull stinging pain in his stomach.

Þóra shook her head. She couldn’t see who was sitting behind the wheel. But, like him, she knows quite well who it was. Símon and María Pétursdóttir, Hörður’s first girlfriend, have been more or less together since they met in Ísafjörður thirteen years ago.

Mainly more.

“Well,” he says, nudging her lightly with his elbow. “There’s no time to waste. Leave your purse behind. It makes you look like a homosexual.”

Þóra sighs. “Wow, what a funny guy you are.”

They leave the car and walk through the lot along the security fence, towards the closed gate.

Hörður runs the fingers of his right hand through his dark red shock of hair, which is combed back and sits like a helmet on top of his head. It hangs in thick waves on both sides of his face, which looks most like a weatherbeaten crag, and reaches down to his shoulderblades in back. He is wearing a black shirt, black pants, heavy motorcycle boots of black leather, with thick soles and steel toes, and a black, unbuttoned leather overcoat. The coat is full-length with double stitching at all the seams and a large, high collar, split in back. The coat is custom-made and is quite a piece of work, just over four meters square, an inch thick, and nearly fifteen kilos in weight.

At his side patters Þóra in flatbottomed canvas sneakers, white socks and khaki trousers, her hands buried in her jacket pockets and a chilly frown on her delicate face.

They enter a three-meter-long wire-mesh tunnel and stop in front of the white turnstile gate. To the right of the stout gate is a doorphone with a black, staring camera eye.

Hörður pushes a button on the doorphone.

A crackling sound is heard.

“Yes?” asks a mechanical voice from a little speaker behind a perforated metal plate.

“Hörður Grímsson and Þórhildur Sverrisdóttir from the Criminal Investigation Department of the Police in Reykjavik,” answers Hörður.

The crackling of the doorphone stops and they wait for a few seconds.

“Alright,” says the mechanical voice. There is a click and a buzz and the turnstile gate begins to move. Þóra goes first. She pushes her way in between the sturdy iron bars and sweeps through. The gate is almost too narrow for Hörður. He needs to bend his knees, push his head down and his arms to his sides. The white-painted iron bars press against him, the electric motor whines and is about to fail when the police officer finally escapes this prison.

“Nothing broken?” Þóra asks with a grin.

“In me? No. But I don’t know about the gate,” he mutters, brushing flakes of white paint off his coat sleeve.

They walk along a paved path that branches into an empty space between the buildings and the gate. Hörður walks in front and Þóra follows him like his shadow. This is her

first visit to the prison and her eyes wander instinctively in all directions. They turn right and walk straight toward Building 1, a low, flat and almost windowless structure that houses the Security and Detention Divisions.

On a blue steel door is a sign with yellow block letters:

VISITORS

The door opens and a blue-uniformed prison guard lets them into something that might be called a lobby, but which is actually just an isolated part of a windowless passageway connecting Building 1 and Building 2.

“You’re early,” mutters the guard, a slim man in his thirties whose back has started to bend and who has started growing thicker around the middle. His nearly non-expressive face is a yellowish tinge; he has bags under his eyes and a bald spot on his head.

The joyless, monotonous job of prison guard is slowly turning him into a weary old man.

He pushes a button on the wall in front of the closed access-control door, looking simultaneously at the camera eye up in the corner. Somewhere on the other side of the door another guard monitors their every move.

The lock buzzes; he opens the door and lets them through.

They walk silently along the same passageway, to the same kind of door at its western end.

The floor is waxed and their footsteps echo dully in the cold, spiritless space.

Again the guard pushes a button on the wall and looks up into a camera in the corner. The lock buzzes, the door opens and they walk into a windowless, white-painted vestibule with three blue doors in it, two of which are closed and locked. The locked doors lead to the Detention Division on the one hand, and the Security Division on the other.

The third door is open a crack. It leads to the guards’ control room and it is there that the group goes, the guard first, then Hörður, with Þóra bringing up the rear.

The control room is small and the air inside it is heavy, smelling of coffee and boredom. At one end is a desk, and at the other shelves with notebooks and log books. Above the desk are three large flat screens, each of them divided into many smaller grids. Each grid shows a different perspective from security cameras. The grids show corridors, doors, work areas, rest areas, tables and chairs. In some places prisoners can be seen, in others not. Together the grids form a large beehive in which the buildings on the lot are the hive and the prisoners the bees.

The hive is gray-colored and not entirely in focus, while the bees are sluggish and sad, suffering from claustrophobia, mental disorders and suppressed urges.

In front of the desk are two high-backed swivel chairs, and in one of them sits the guard who watched them through the lenses of the cameras and let them through the doors. He is older than the guard who greeted them at the door, so gray and sickly-looking that he appears to have merged into the tattered chair.

“What can I do for you, kids?” he asks in a soft voice, turning the chair around slowly.

“We pre-arranged a visit,” says Hörður, showing the guard his identification. “With the warden’s permission, we’re going to have a look in the cell where Símon was held.”

“Look for what?” asks the guard, smiling wearily. “He turned over his things to me last night, according to regulations. He was locked in his cell from ten last evening until

eight o'clock in the morning. Then he got his things back and was discharged. There's nothing in the cell. At most one or two posters on the walls."

"We're going to have a look at those posters," says Hörður obstinately.

"Up to you," says the guard with a sigh. He opens a large register on the desk and pushes it toward the policeman. "You have to sign in here, both of you. Name, purpose of your visit, arrival time and party responsible."

"Yes. I know. I've been here before," mutters Hörður sulkily. He leans over the book and dutifully records all of the information in the designated space.

"You can still bow out if you want," he then says, handing Þóra the pen.

She hesitates, but takes the pen and writes in the book under the watchful eyes of the older guard.

"Come with me," says the younger guard, leading them out of the control room.

He takes out a large key ring, selects a key, opens the door to the Security Division and lets them through. The door is iron, painted blue, and has a window made of frosted, bulletproof, double glass, with wire mesh between the panes.

The Security Division is a white, windowless wing with four blue iron doors on one side and an empty wall on the other. Three of the cells are traditional isolation cells, while the fourth is a so-called camera cell. It lacks furniture, is entirely covered in rubber, with a drain in the middle, a plastic-wrapped mattress on the floor and a camera in a wire-mesh cage on the ceiling.

The division houses, for shorter or longer terms, prisoners who happen on the one hand to have violated the institution's rules and pose a danger to other prisoners, and on the other who are vulnerable to attacks or threats from other prisoners.

Simon was in the former category.

"He was in Cell 2, this one here." The guard unlocks the cell door by lifting a bent iron bar and pulling it to the right, thereby dragging a stout iron bolt from its notch on the frame. Then he pulls hard on the heavy door, opening the cell.

Meeting their eyes is a small, simple accommodation. Three white walls and a window in the upper part of the end wall. Inside the door is an open steel toilet, a plastic sink, a cold-water tap and a tin mirror. On the right side of the cell is a narrow iron cot, and on the left an iron table with a wooden surface. In front of the table is a chair that is simply iron legs with a wooden seat. The cot is bolted down to the concrete floor, like the desk and the chair.

The window has vertical bars and frosted glass that provides no view out, but which lets milky light in.

"Hello? Is someone there?" is called from the next cell. "Isn't it eight o'clock? Aren't we getting breakfast?"

The guard walks to the door of Cell 3. On the door is a vertical window at eye-level, not unlike a mail slot. The guard lifts the shutter and looks into the cell through the bulletproof glass. "Relax. You'll get breakfast later. Just calm down."

"Relax?" says the man in the cell, clearly both insulted and angry. "Are we supposed to starve here? Don't we have rights? I want to speak to a lawyer! I want to speak to a doctor!"

"Try to contain yourself, Baldur," says the guard calmly. "When you go on like that, no one wants to talk to you."

He closes the shutter, at which the prisoner screams and slams his fists against the inside of the door.

The guard pulls a long wooden club from a leather loop on his belt and strikes the iron door once with it forcefully and determinedly. The blow is severe and sharp and echoes off the walls like a gunshot.

Hörður and Þóra's hair stands up, but the prisoner shuts up like an obedient dog.

"Sorry about this," says the guard, hanging the club back on his belt. "Tiny disciplinary problem, that's all."

"Baldur who?" asks Þóra, her eyes opening wide behind her thick glasses.

"Baldur Berndsen," replies the guard, turning up his nose as if he smells a bad odor.

"That's what I thought," mutters Þóra, clearing her throat.

"The child molester?" Hörður asks in a muffled voice. "The custodian who lured the girls into the boiler room?"

Þóra nods calmly, as if distracted, but the guard shrugs and points bad-temperedly into Cell 2. "This is the cell that you came to see. You have twenty minutes. After that I'll come to get you. If you want out earlier, ring the bell at the door. I'm leaving now, and will shut and lock the wing behind me. Is that understood?"

"Understood," says Hörður, giving him a thumbs-up with his right hand. "Just one question before you go."

"What is it?" asks the guard suspiciously.

"Was Símon moved to this division against his will?" asks Hörður.

"No, not quite," says the guard. "He got involved in an altercation with certain men in Building 3 and threatened them with all sorts of violence right in front of us. We had no other choice but to isolate him, and he didn't object."

"You mean he was almost asking to be put in isolation?" asks Hörður.

"Yeah, something like that," says the guard, shrugging his shoulders. "He knows the rules. He should have known that he couldn't get away with threatening other prisoners in the presence of witnesses."

"If he'd done more than just threaten them, then what?" asks Hörður.

"Then he might have been charged," says the guard.

"And the sentence lengthened, or what?" asks Hörður.

"Yes, that's very likely," says the guard.

"Then he wouldn't have been released today?" asks Hörður.

"Obviously not," says the guard with a sigh. "Was there something else? Time's wasting. You have seventeen minutes left."

"No, nothing more. Thank you for the informative answers," says Hörður, signaling Þóra to follow him. "Come on. Let's put our time to good use."

He walks ahead of her into the empty cell, as the guard turns on his heels, strides back down the corridor and exits the wing, complete with key-rattling and door slamming.

"Well, what have we here? Pretty much nothing, it looks to me," says Hörður, placing his hands on his hips. He stands by the back wall of the cell, in the space between the cot and the table, and lets his eyes wander around the rectangular space.

On the bed is a crumpled blanket and a thin pillow in a blue pillowcase with yellow stripes. On the thin mattress is a light-colored fitted sheet, torn and tattered. On the wall above the bed are two posters. Centerfolds from Danish porn magazines.

The table is empty, apart from countless rings left over from coffee cups, glossy grease stains and snot-blotches at the edges.

In the sink is a piece of green soap, and on it hangs a shabby wet cloth.

On the inside of the toilet bowl are old and new shit smudges, and besides the rank stench of shit, the air in the confined cell is saturated with the odors of bad breath, sweaty feet, and acrid testosterone sweat.

Simon is gone, but his heavy, suffocating spirit is still present.

“How should we go about this?” asks Hörður, rubbing his chin with the fingers of his right hand. “Which would you rather do, examine the backs of the posters, or rummage in the bed?”

No reply.

He looks at her. “Þóra?”

“Baldur Berndsen. I can hardly believe it.” She stands dead-still just inside the door and stares at the wall separating the cells, as if seeing through the grimy paint and thick concrete and regarding the convicted pedophile. “He’s an absolute ogre. I read the report. I saw the photos. I ...”

“Hey!” shouts Hörður, snapping his fingers.

“Yes?” she blinks and looks at him.

“Don’t let these men into your head! Do you hear me?” Hörður speaks quickly, emphasizing every word by striking the tabletop with the palm of his hand. “If you let them into your head, you’ll take them home with you. Then you’ll take them into bed, into your dreams. They’ll eat you alive, suck all your strength from you, and rob you of all your happiness. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

She nods, slightly sheepishly. “Yes, yes. I understand. But I just...”

“No! No *just!*” He hammers the table with his palm. “Intuition and perseverance have gotten you far, Þóra. You’re a rookie in the Criminal Investigation Department. A fucking promising rookie, in my opinion. But you’ll get to meet a lot of bastards in this line of work, and there is one and only one thing that separates death from life in our profession. One talent, one gift that separates those who keep their heads and those who burn out. A little something that not everyone has. A little something that we weren’t taught at the police academy, that’s for sure. Do you know what it is?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “No, probably not.”

He presses the palms of his hands into the table and straightens up. “*Anesthesia*. Apathy. Numbness. Cold. Not caring. Not feeling. You understand?”

She nods. “Yes. I think so.”

“Good,” he says with a sigh. “Then should we get to work? There’s not that much to sift through, of course, nor do we have a lot of time. I’m pretty much not expecting to find anything, but we’ve got nothing to lose.”

“It’s a dirty job, but someone’s got to do it,” mutters Þóra. She takes off her jacket and tosses it on the bed, then rolls up the sleeves of her white knitted sweater and looks around. “What a fucking shithole this is. It smells like a sewer. Where should we start? How do you want to divide the work?”

“Not a good idea,” says Hörður as he picks up the jacket from the bed and hands it back to Þóra.

He points at a large, circular stain on the sheet.

“What’s that?” she asks, looking in horror at the stain and then at Hörður.

“Semen,” he says apologetically, as if he, the man, were responsible for the bodily fluids and filthiness of his fellow males.

“Fucking disgusting,” mutters Þóra, winding her coat in her arms. She takes two steps back and breathes rapidly through her nose, deathly pale and with a feverish gleam in her wide-open eyes.

“Are you alright?” asks Hörður.

“Yes, I just...” She gasps for breath and supports herself with one hand against the wall by the sink. “A dizzy spell or something. My head’s a bit hot. I felt like I was suffocating.”

“Claustrophobia?” he asks.

“Something like that, yes,” she mutters, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

“Just go out and try to calm yourself,” he says, pointing out through the open door. “Take deep breaths, etc. I’ll just start without you.”

“Yes. I’ll do that. Won’t be long,” she mutters as she steps out the door and disappears into the corridor, her back bent, her feet unsteady.

Hörður squats down and looks under the tabletop. There is nothing suspicious to see. He hunches down on his hands and knees and peeks beneath the bed. It is half dark; the floor is covered with dust and lint, but nothing appears unnatural to him. Still, he should have brought a flashlight.

He stands up, takes off his coat and lays it on the desk. He pushes up his shirtsleeves before taking the covers off the duvet and pillow. He shakes them, looks them over and tosses them to the floor. He shakes the pillow, looks it over and tosses it to the floor. The duvet receives the same treatment.

Dust fills the air and an odor of wet, coagulated semen, stagnant sweat, and old urine gushes up.

He takes the sheet off the bed, shakes it lightly and then tosses it onto the duvet.

The mattress is old and worn; there are long gashes in the light-blue protective material and through them shines the rotten cushion. He presses the mattress everywhere with his palms before lifting it off the bedframe.

He is about to turn the mattress over but stops when he spies something beneath it.

A Danish pornographic magazine. *Rapport*

Hörður picks up the magazine from the bedframe and lets the mattress fall back into its place. Then he sits down on the bedside and flips through the magazine. It is several months old, torn, frayed, and stuck together in places. He leafs slowly through it, scrutinizing every page. He looks through the photos, reads between the lines.

He is searching for something unusual. Something that should not be there. He finds it on the next-to-last page, on a white stripe separating two classified ads.

It is a numeric sequence. Nineteen numbers written conscientiously with a blue ballpoint pen.

“Bingo,” whispers Hörður, smiling wryly.

He shuts the magazine and folds it, stands up, straightens his back and puts his leather coat back on.

II

Póra totters out of the cell and turns right into the corridor, her down jacket gathered in her arms and her temples beaded with sweat. She leans back against the empty wall, closes her eyes and lets herself sink until her bottom touches the floor. She squeezes her jacket like an infant at the breast, hangs her head on her chest and lets her burning hot forehead rest on her bended knees.

She breathes rapidly and irregularly, partly sobbing, her body weak and numb, as if it had suffered a shock, and it trembles, has chills of some sort. The presence of the pedophile triggered old memories, a cognitive revisitation.

Póra crashed into the past and experienced terror that is as debilitating now as then. The human mind makes no distinction between real and imagined danger.

She experienced terror, which is why she's in shock.

The Ogre appeared to her after all these years. Black and bent, foul smelling and ragged, grinning with cruelty.

She felt it; she saw it. It had appeared to her bright as day in the recesses of her mind, as if it had risen up from the floor and locked its emaciated paws on her...

When she was growing up in the Norðurmýri neighborhood a story went round one autumn, a chilling rumor that started as a hatred- and fear-blended whisper among the parents, spread like a black virus and ended as a mythological monster in the minds of the kids in the neighborhood.

An evil villain is hiding among us, the rumor went. A so-called *ogre*. A twisted man who lures children into his car, drives them into his dark garage and does *hideous* things to them.

Two girls from the Hlíðar neighborhood had, at a three-to-four-week interval, landed in the claws of the ogre, but neither of them had been able to say exactly when the attacks took place or give the police a tangible description of the perpetrator, the car he was driving or the garage that he had at his disposal.

Fear of the anonymous perpetrator seemed to hold the girls tight in its grip, but sometimes a temporary carelessness seized them, at which point they would start giggling for nothing, display all sorts of attitude and distort the questions of the police and Child Protective Services agents.

Physical examinations removed all doubt that the alleged sexual offenses were neither imagination nor invention, while mentally, the girls were as if paralyzed with fear, their minds in a haze of denial, depression and apathy resulting directly from their horrific experience, according to psychologists.

Information about the ogre was both vague and scarce, being the sort of mystery man that he was, a shadow incarnate of an unclear age, driving around in a blue, gray, or green car, and having access or having had access to a garage. The kids in the neighborhood snuck out at night, met at predetermined secret spots and held meetings about the matter. They exchanged anecdotal horror stories, read between the lines of newspaper clippings, guessed at what was left out and collectively created a relatively clear picture of the monster that slunk like a shadow from house to house, snuck along the walls and searched for little kids to do hideous things to.

That's how he came into being, the black-clad man with the yellow eyes, sharp claws and fish-mouth. The monster that in everyday speech was never called anything other than The Ogre.

The Ogre was ancient, but young in spirit, with a large, bald head and slender body. Its nose was long and bent, its skin gray and slimy and its mouth round and toothless. It wore a black overcoat that was torn and tattered, making it look like a bird, a so-called noxious fowl that either spread its wings or folded them against its bony sides.

In The Ogre's crotch was a black vortex. If it caught a kid it would push him into the vortex, and then the kid would fall down into darkness that was as thick and suffocating as a wool sweater. The kid would fall through the woolen darkness and finally land on a hard concrete floor in a locked room in the basement of The Ogre's house.

The kid would scream and cry, pound on the door and scratch the walls, but no one would come to get him because no one could hear him.

But then footsteps and a rattling would be heard, someone would stop in front of door and a key would be stuck in the keyhole.

The Ogre would open the door of the room. It would no longer have a vortex in its crotch. It would have a huge dog's penis, fiery red, oblong and curved like a bull's horn.

The Ogre would grin with its toothless fish-mouth, because it had come to the basement to do the hideous thing to the kid...

Oh, sick!

When the kids weren't making up stories about The Ogre, they slunk around the neighborhood searching for it, until someone saw a movement, a shadow— whatever it was— and then they would scream, scatter, and run as fast as their feet would carry them through gardens and streets, between parked cars, around corners, over bushes, fences, and walls in search of good hiding places.

November 1987 was a month of fear and twisted imagination.

"Go home!" shouted a hysterical woman from the doorway of a house on Mánagata Street. She was wearing a nightgown and slippers and directed her distorted voice at the half-full moon, like a cat in heat. "Your mom and dad are looking for you! Go home, you naughty worms! Go home before something terrible happens to you!"

The voice fell silent, the light went out and the door slammed.

Þóra squatted behind a rubbish bin in a dark alley, catching her breath. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, a pleated vest and sneakers, with a pigtail in her hair and Coke-bottle glasses on her freckled nose. Her heart pounded in her chest, pumping adrenaline through her veins, her wide-open eyes glistening with agitation and her arms and legs shaking with fear.

"What should we do?" she whispered.

"I don't know," replied her friend Ólafur. He was ten years old, and she nine. They both went to East Elementary, lived in the same neighborhood and often met after school to play chess or football.

"I think they've all gone home."

He nodded.

"Maybe we should go home too?"

He nodded again. They left the alley and walked together to the intersection of Mánagata Street and Gunnarsbraut Road.

"See you tomorrow," she said.

"Okay," he said.

Ólafur lived on Skarphéðinsgata Street, but Þóra on Skeggjagata Street. He went north, she south.

It was a quarter to ten and the oblong hollow called Norðurmýri was silent, dark, and gloomy, like a large cemetery as it napped beneath the low-hanging autumn moon. The concrete buildings, originally gray and coated with shell-sand, had darkened over the years and merged with the twilight like giant tombstones. Behind high garden walls grew old trees that stretched their naked branches like groping hands into the darkness of night. The streets were deserted and empty, apart from parked cars, a cat here and there and drifting leaves.

Little Þóra walked quickly, but dared not run for fear of the echo of her own footsteps. As she settled down after the evening's rollicking her imagination was as fertile as could be and the terror as real as could be.

Every single shadow effervesced with life, every single glimmer was a staring eye, the wind was a breath from a gaping mouth, the darkness was hungry and the night was an empty belly.

She kept herself close to the concrete garden walls, glanced now and then over her shoulder, quickened her pace and pushed her glasses up her nose at every other step.

The gate to home, finally!

She opened the green iron gate. It creaked softly on its ponderous hinges, but the piercing creak was like music in her ears, because she had reached her own yard; had made it. The building was two stories, with a basement and attic, a dark concrete rectangle with a long balcony on the south side and high dormer windows. A paved path and broad steps led to the illuminated main door, but Þóra jumped over the rose bushes, snuck between the trees and went behind the building. There she went down some stairs, stood in front of a low, dilapidated basement door, stood tiptoe and grabbed a key hidden in a gap above the door.

After dinner she had told her parents that she was going down to the basement to play with the boy on the first floor, which is why she hadn't been able to ring the doorbell in front.

Over the basement door was an outdoor lamp in a white glass cover. The bulb was dim and the cover dirty, leaving something to be said for the light it cast. The door had an old-fashioned lock and a vertical window with yellow-brown glass in it. Þóra squinted and tried to find the keyhole with her fingers and stick the key into it. The door was half buried and in front of it, at the bottom of the stairs, was a rather large pile of leaves that rustled beneath her feet.

It was very dark behind the building; the two-car garage and tall trees blocked all the light.

Þóra got the feeling that someone was standing behind her, watching her.

Was she imagining it? She glanced over her shoulder, but saw no one.

"Hello?"

No answer.

Her heart began to beat faster, a chill ran down her spine and in her stomach she felt a heat that turned in circles and moved slowly downward until she felt she needed to pee.

Should she scream?

No.

She started trying again to get the damned key into the keyhole. Her fingers shook, her eyes blinked, her feet shuffled, the key knocked against the keyhole and skated to and fro along the rusty metal, but then it finally hit the hole and slipped in.

Yes!

She turned the key, pulled open the door, stepped over the high threshold and locked the door behind her.

Oof! She breathed easier.

The basement was dark, except for a faint gleam that carried from the outside light through the door's window and a red light from the washing machine owned by the family on the top story. To the door's right was a light switch, if she remembered correctly. She groped at the wall, found the switch and clicked it on. There came a sudden crack and then a pop, a gold flash lit up the unpainted basement for a second, a glowing red thread flared and burned out and the room went dark once more.

She flicked the switch up and then down, but nothing happened.

The bulb was broken.

Suddenly she heard footsteps.

Oh, no! She pressed her back against the wall and stared into the darkness, toward the door that led to the building's inner stairway. It was closed, but under the door was a gleam of light, broken by feet that stepped closer and closer.

She felt herself growing warmer; a lump rose in her throat and her knees went weak. She whined softly, like a frightened little dog, but covered her mouth with both hands and let herself sink down along the wall until her bottom touched the cold concrete floor.

The door opened and a silhouette appeared in the doorway. She should have recognized the outlines of her neighbor, the father of the boy on the first story, but she was much too rattled to be able to think clearly.

Instead of her neighbor she saw The Ogre, in the flesh.

Póra? Is that you?

It stared at her, its yellow eyes shining in the dark. It was dressed in black rags and smelled of garbage.

She hid her face in her hands.

What are you doing there? Is something wrong?

It strode up to her open-mouthed, its fingers spread and penis erect.

She shook inside.

Come on. I'll take you upstairs.

It touched her, it shook her.

That's enough. Stand up, dear.

She tried to scream but was unable and peed her pants without being able to stop it.

Horror.

Powerlessness.

Humiliation.

As if had happened yesterday...

Póra lifts her head from her knees and opens her eyes. She is sitting on the floor of the corridor in the Security Division in Little Hraun Prison, looking at the blue iron door of Cell 3.

Two years ago, in spring 2006, Baldur Berndsen was arrested on suspicion of sexual offences against three young girls eight years earlier, in the winter of 1998 to 1999. Baldur was the night guard at a hotel downtown, but had been a custodian at East Elementary when the alleged crimes occurred. He was alleged to have shut the girls inside a narrow back closet of the school's boiler room, where he groped and molested

them and forced them into sex with him. He lured the girls to the school's basement and into the aforementioned room by claiming that they had to make up for their wrongdoings as directed by the school authorities, or else be expelled from school; all of the girls had been called to the principal's office for minor disciplinary problems.

Eight years ago, two suicide attempts, three drug and alcohol treatments and sixty hours of psychiatric therapy later, one of the girls opened up in a magazine interview. There she told of how the custodian at her school had sexually abused her, but named neither him nor the school. She talked about "the courteous custodian," his sticky hands, bad breath, swollen penis and what she had had to endure in the hot boiler room, while her classmates run laughing through the corridors above her. The other two girls contacted her separately after the interview was published. They recognized the description of the "polite" custodian and had also endured "visits" to the foul-smelling boiler room, where hope suffocated and innocence died.

They met, all three, and compared their stories, wept together, mourned together and decided to stand together. They hired a lawyer and filed charges.

When Baldur was arrested, Þóra had been in the police force's Traffic Division for five years. She was immediately convinced that Baldur Berndsen was The Ogre who terrorized Norðurmýri in her youth nineteen years earlier, but who was never caught.

She wrote a letter to the head of the police force's Criminal Investigation Department, Axel M. Axelsson, describing to him her suspicions and explaining the reasons for them. She pointed to the fact that Baldur Berndsen had been domiciled in Norðurmýri at the time that the girls from the Hlíðar neighborhood were raped in a garage there, and along with the letter sent a document confirming this fact—a page from the 1987 phone book. She urged that the girls' cases be opened and that they be shown photos of Baldur, preferably from the time period in question. She also urged that Baldur's places of residence during the years between these events be investigated. She drew attention to the fact that if Baldur had committed the crimes against the girls in Norðurmýri in 1987, it was unlikely that he would have kept control of himself until 1998, when the alleged crimes in East Elementary were committed. Perhaps it would be possible to connect Baldur with unsolved sex crimes, which could then be reopened and reinvestigated in the hope of gaining a conviction and closing the cases.

Axel responded well to the letter. He said nothing regarding its contents, but urged Þóra in a brief message to apply for a position in the Criminal Investigation Department. Which she did, despite being very unhappy with the apathy and lethargy of the department regarding Baldur's potential past crimes. Later she discovered that shortage of funding and manpower had set its mark on the account in this particular case, as with so many others.

Because of the statute of limitations, which was invalidated by new legislation a year later, Baldur was never charged with crimes against the two girls in Norðurmýri, but shortly before Christmas 2006 he was sentenced in Supreme Court to three years in prison for the crimes that he committed against the three girls in East Elementary. Eight months earlier he had been sentenced in District Court to four years in prison. Baldur's lawyer appealed that decision to the Supreme Court, referring inter alia to the time that had elapsed since the alleged crimes, discrepancies in the testimony of witnesses and the overall law-abiding nature of the accused, who had a clean criminal record.

The Supreme Court reduced the sentence, but considered it heavy compared to previous decisions in similar cases. This inspired loud controversy that died out quickly and was forgotten.

Twenty-two months later everyone was ready to forget Baldur Berndsen.

All except the victims.

And Þóra.

She stands up and walks as if hypnotized to the sturdy cell door.

The terror that The Ogre awakened in her had followed her half her youth, through her teenage years and into her adult years. It was probably the memory of The Ogre that caused her to enter the Police Academy in the first place, instead of studying sports sciences or education, for example. Deep within, behind her fear and disgust regarding The Ogre, she wanted to find it, catch it, expose it and lock it in a closet like this.

She stands directly before the cold door, carefully reaches out with her right hand and touches it. The dark blue paint is slippery, in fact greasy, covering the thick iron like stretched-out skin.

Her heart starts beating faster, her mouth goes dry and she blinks incessantly.

She wants to peek into the cell. She wants to see him, the pedophile Baldur Berndsen, and she wants to see it, The Ogre *itself*. See it as it really *is* and then stop believing in it.

The Ogre of her youth still haunts her mind, whether asleep or awake. For Baldur to be caught and convicted and locked up changed nothing, since he is a man of flesh and blood, and not a mythological monster, with a fish-mouth and a red dog-penis.

Baldur sits behind bars, but The Ogre roams free in her mind.

She needs to connect the man with the monster. That's why she wants to look into the cell. She needs to believe that the phenomena Baldur Berndsen and The Ogre are one and the same.

Þóra sighs. She needs to shut out The Ogre from her mind, shut it into this cell and leave it behind when she goes.

Her right hand creeps up along the door, like a big spider. Her fingers touch the shutter covering the horizontal peephole.

Should she peek into the cell or not?

Her heart beats faster and its hammering grows heavier, her mouth and neck are burning, her ears buzz loudly, her insides heat up and she has trouble thinking clearly.

It's now or never.

Now?

No. She's not going to do this. She's not going to peek in, but before she knows it she has lifted the shutter and is standing on tiptoe.

The Ogre's attractive power is both exciting and overwhelming, like poison that tickles as it paralyzes.

She presses up to the iron door, breathes fast through her nose and stares into the cell through the glass of the peephole.

Cell 3 is just like Cell 2.

On the cot sits a middle-aged man, leaning forward, resting his arms on his thighs and staring down at the floor, dressed in plain clothing that is too big for him and has been washed countless times. He is short, but not short-limbed, and is in fact nothing but skin and bones. His head is small and spherical, bald apart from gray tufts of hair at his neck. His neck is long, his back is bent and sticking from it are sharp shoulder blades, as if he

were hiding folded wings beneath his gray sweater. His hands are thin and sinewy, the backs of them long and his fingers feminine. His cheek is turned toward the door and he appears to be speaking softly to himself; at least his thin lips are moving beneath his bent nose. The eye that is visible is half-closed and sits deep beneath his furry brow. The skin covering his hands and bony face is covered with dark spots and discolored patches, mostly ashen, but yellow and brown around his nails and eyes.

Baldur Berndsen is around fifty, but looks to be at least twenty years older.

Suddenly he looks up and to the side, straight into Þóra's eyes. She stiffens, unable to move even though she longs to scream, slam the shutter shut and run away.

The Ogre opens its toothless mouth, straightens its birdlike body and stares at her with yellow, piercing eyes.

"Who are you?" it asks impudently as it jumps up and walks to the door with the deftness and speed of a teenage boy.

Þóra is as if paralyzed; she cannot even blink her wide-open eyes. The buzz in her ears amplifies and becomes a tingling murmur, the heat that erupted inside her gathers into a ball in her lower abdomen; her knees go weak and start shaking, and without warning she feels an intense need to pee.

The Ogre has come right up to the door. "You're not one of the guards. Who are you? What is your name?"

At the bottom of the glass is a row of small holes that make it possible to speak through the closed door.

"My name Þórhildur Sverrisdóttir and I am from the Department of Criminal Investigation in Reykjavík." She is so short of breath and her voice so weak that it is barely a whisper.

"Hm." It closes its eyes and looks aside for a moment, as if deep in thought, and then looks back into the eyes of the police woman as a faint smile plays on its lips.

"Þórhildur Sverrisdóttir. I've heard of you."

"Oh?" She tries to swallow, but her throat is clamped shut.

"Yes. You were on the national team in women's soccer, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"The team's scoring king. Or is it called scoring queen?"

"Yes, I..."

"You're a lesbian, aren't you?" The Ogre smiles and squints.

"What?"

"No need to be shy with me!" It laughs softly. "I saw a photo of you and your girlfriend in *Seen & Heard*. She was also on the team. Dark-haired, slightly boyish. A nurse. What's her name again?"

"We broke up," she whispers weakly.

The Ogre's presence is mentally and physically burdensome, like a vague pressure that numbs the flesh and darkens the mind. The heat in her belly makes her nauseous and she feels as if she is about to faint. She leans on the door to keep herself from sinking and squeezes her thighs together to prevent herself from peeing her pants.

"Oh? How sad," it says, tilting its head. "What happened? Was it the sex? Did you have a disagreement, or...?"

"I've got to go now," she whispers in a trembly voice.

“No, no, what nonsense. We’re just starting to get to know each other,” it says in its deep, gruff, mawkish voice.

“Yes, I must...” She lets herself sink to her heels, at the same time releasing the shutter, which slams shut. She takes two steps backwards, loses her balance and is about to fall when someone grabs her upper right arm.

She looks up.

“What’s going on here?” asks Hörður hurriedly, towering over her like a black crag. He helps her straighten up and supports her until she regains her balance and stands on her own.

“Nothing, I...” she mutters, pushing up her glasses.

“Þóra!” comes a call from within Cell 3. “Are you there? Talk to me! Don’t go!”

Hörður looks harshly at the closed cell door and then at Þóra, who withers when she sees her colleague’s expression.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean...” she mutters, trying to grab Hörður’s left arm, but he pushes her away and turns his back to her.

He steps over to Cell 3, lifts up the bent iron bar, unlocks the immensely heavy door and jerks it open.

Baldur Berndsen stands like a razorbill inside the door, rubbing his hands and staring fearfully and openmouthed at the red-haired giant filling the doorway.

“You!” Hörður points at Baldur, and then bows his head as he steps through the doorway into the prisoner’s cell. “Child molester! Shut in here so that no one can hurt you while you serve your measly sentence.”

“I’ve changed!” wails Baldur hysterically. “I’ve repented! I found Jesus!”

“What? You found Jesus? How exciting,” spits out Hörður, moving one step closer to the prisoner. “I didn’t even know he’d been lost.”

He strikes out at Baldur, but misses.

“Hörður! No! Don’t do this!” shouts Þóra, running into the cell after him. She jumps up to him from behind and tries to grab him, but his leather coat is as thick and slippery as shark-skin and the strongman slides effortlessly from her grasp.

“Don’t hurt me! Let me be!” yells the prisoner, who raises his hands to his face, bends his knees and retreats backwards into the cell, right up to the wall.

“I’m calling the guard! Guard! Guard! Help! I’m being attacked!”

Hörður raises the clenched fist of his right hand to strike.

“Don’t! No!”

The prisoner starts wailing in pain as soon as Hörður punches him, but Þóra turns away, shuts her eyes and covers her ears with her hands.

III

09:13

They drive over the heaths back to Reykjavik, watching the road silently, Hörður at the wheel, Þóra in the passenger seat. Since setting off from Little Hraun Prison, neither has spoken a single word.

The sun is now high in the sky, illuminating the mist or fog that lies over the land. From the heavens shines a bright, silvery light, while on either side of them the gray-green expanse of moss glows as far as the eye can see and the fog permits.

The black car rushes onward like a metal shadow.

Hörður clears his throat and glances quickly at Þóra. “Are you angry?”

She shrugs, looks out the side window. “Yes and no. You shouldn’t have punched the man. Even though he deserved it.”

He reduces his speed slightly and relaxes his grip on the wheel. The knuckles of his right hand are grazed and bloody.

“I’ll try to keep you out of this, if a case is made of it. It’s enough for me to end up in trouble because of it.”

“Thanks, but if I hadn’t gone and talked to the bastard, it wouldn’t have happened. You told me to leave him be, but I didn’t listen, unfortunately.”

“Why were you talking to him?”

She sighs. “I know this ogre. When I was growing up in Norðurmýri he lived one story below us.”

Hörður’s eyes open wide. “Who? Him? Baldur Berndsen?”

She nods. “I played with his son quite often. I visited them quite often. I saw the man almost every day.”

“I understand. Did he recognize you again?”

“I think so,” she mutters pensively. “But I can’t be sure.”

“But you never ended up in...? He never did anything...? In the old days, I mean.”

She shook her head. “No. But once, when I was nine years old, he came to me alone in the basement. In the dark. The lightbulb had broken and...”

A lump rises in her throat.

“And what?”

“Nothing,” she mutters, shuddering. “Nothing happened, but there in the darkness, I sensed who he really was, that smiling, courteous man. I didn’t see my friend’s dad, but the evil man concealed behind the mask. I suddenly saw him in the right light. I saw the pedophile, the monster. But only for a moment or so.”

Hörður nods. “Intuition.”

“What?”

“In our job intelligence matters a great deal,” he says, clearing his throat. “We use logic, we put two and two together, we put things into context and so on. We also need to follow our hearts, to know the difference between right and wrong, to know when we’re on the right track, have a feeling for this and that and have the nerve to follow the feeling. But what is most important, most of *all*, is intuition. Intuition isn’t in our heads and it’s not in our hearts. It’s here.”

He points to a spot on his lower abdomen, about two finger-widths below his navel.

“Solar plexus,” she says.

“Intuition,” he reiterates. “The little voice in the stomach. The warning light. The lie detector. The heat that rises when you’re *hot* and drops when you’re *cold*. You know what I mean?”

She nods. “Sort of like the sixth sense.”

He sighs. “Intuition, damn it! Can’t it be called intuition?”

“Yes, of course.” She smiles wryly.

"*That's* what happened in the basement when you were a kid. Intuition told you who this man was, though your mind told you differently. The mind depends on knowledge, the heart is loaded with prejudices, but intuition is always pure. It tells the truth. A good cop listens to that truth. The other cops write tickets. Do you get what I mean?"

"Yes," she says, laughing quietly. "I get what you mean."

"Good." He smiles wryly.

"But what? Did something come out of this? Did you find something in the cell?"

He nods and smiles triumphantly.

"Really? What did you find?"

He pulls the folded porn magazine from inside his coat and hands it to her.

"Ugh!"

"Oh, come on. It's just naked women," he says, poking at the magazine. "Turn to the last page."

She turns to the last page to find a wide variety of advertisements, most on the tasteless side.

"Do you see the ad with the pregnant-woman movies?" he asks, without taking his eyes off the road. "Above the penis-enlargement gadgets. Next to the phone-chat ads."

"Yes," she says with a nauseous grimace. "Fucking disgusting!"

"The ad doesn't matter! What queasiness! Look at the space beneath it. The white line that separates the ads."

"White line. Space. Yes. I see it. There's something written here," she says, bringing the magazine closer to her wide-open eyes.

In the white space is the numerical sequence:

0057131317423131781

"It's a phone number," says Hörður. "A foreign phone number. I bet it's Colombian."

"You think Símon's in touch with someone in Colombia?" Þóra takes out her pocketbook and copies down the sequence from the magazine, in clear and beautifully formed characters.

"No question. He's planning a major cocaine smuggling operation. Someone or something is on the way to this country *as we speak*. I can feel it in me. I know the rascal. He was as taut as a crossbow."

"But he could hardly have called from prison?" Þóra puts the lid on her pen and sticks it and the pocketbook into her purse.

"Yes, that's why he has the number."

"But aren't the phones tapped? And the prisoners can hardly make calls abroad as if they were nothing."

He grins. "Don't be so naive. Phones are smuggled left and right into the prison. People like Símon don't let anything stop them."

"Okay. Wow," she mutters, clicking her tongue. "And then what? Are you going to let Axel have this?"

"Yes. I expect he'll contact Interpol and ask them to look it up. Through them we'll get all the information we need. *Shit*, I hope this all goes smoothly! We've hit the jackpot, I tell you! This is the *big* time, Þóra! Front-page news and panic! Now we'll finally nail that steroid-addled psycho!"

He holds out the palm of his right hand and she slaps it with hers. A light whack is heard as her childlike hand meets his calloused paw.

“*Rockin’ Good News, Baby!*” He adjusts his pitch-black Ray-Ban sunglasses better on his nose before grabbing the wheel again with both hands.

She laughs, folds the porn magazine and sticks it into the door pocket. “Things are never quiet around you, Hörður. I’ll give you that.”

He smiles wryly, shakes a match from a half-empty box and sticks it in his mouth.

“How long since you quit smoking?”

“Since I quit first? Three years now,” he replies, chewing the match.

She grins. “Okay. But how long has it been since you *smoked* last?”

He clears his throat. “Three months. Almost.”

“Well, that’s not such a short time. And how are your lungs? Do you still have asthma?”

He thinks for a moment. “No, actually not, unless I overexert myself. But I still carry an inhaler with me at all times, just in case.”

“You weren’t worth much on long-distance runs at the academy. Always wheezing and panting like crazy!” she says with a laugh.

He smiles. “Yes, I remember. I thought I’d drop dead. But that was only when I tried to keep up with you. You’re an unstoppable monster, I’ll give you that.”

“Yes. But aren’t you glad about finally stopping smoking?”

He shrugs. “Sure, sure. Yeah, glad. But I didn’t stop voluntarily. Bíbí tortured me into it.”

“Didn’t you just need some encouragement? Your asthma was killing you, you have to admit.”

“Hm, yes. But I still miss smoking.” He removes the wet, chewed-up match. “The nagging isn’t exactly what I’d call fun, you see?”

“But it’s good to be free from asthma, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. But there’s always something. Now it’s this shit.” He shows her the back of his right hand, which is covered with psoriasis rashes.

“Aren’t you doing light treatments? You said you’d gotten a referral or something.”

He sighs. “Yeah. I’m supposed to be under the light.”

“And?”

He shrugs. “I always forget. Or don’t feel like it. I don’t know. Something gay about light treatments.”

She shakes her head. “You’re so messed up! What about ointments? Don’t you have any ointments for it?”

“Yes, yes, but...” He clears his throat.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t say a word! Gay?”

He wriggles his shoulders, having grown tired of the topic. “Yes. No. I never remember to use them. Besides, I don’t think they work.”

“Don’t you have to try them to find out whether they work or not?” she asks with motherly concern.

“Þóra, please! I already have a wife. I don’t need another one, okay?”

She puts up her hands. “Yeah. Okay. *Sorry.*”

He sighs. “Aw, I wasn’t going to be boring. *Sorry.*”

“No problem.” She looks out the side window.

The car rushes over the asphalt. They are quiet for several moments.

He clears his throat. "Listen. Can I maybe invite you over for dinner tonight with me and Bíbí? If you're not busy, that is."

"Yeah, sure, I'm totally up for that."

He nods. "Thanks. I think it'd be nice for Bíbí to have a little constructive company. I get so much on her nerves these days. Hormones and all that, you know. Crying and shouting."

"I understand. How far along is she?"

He thinks for a moment. "Hm. The little beast appeared in the beginning of June. That makes it three months, almost. She should be due in early March next year."

"The little beast?" she asks with a smile.

He shrugs, slightly embarrassed. "Yes. That's what I call it. We haven't decided a name yet."

"Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?"

He shakes his head. "No. We'll just wait and see. She wants it that way."

"But you? Want to know what sex it is?"

He shrugs and smiles sheepishly. "I don't know. Yes. No. I don't really want to have a child. Not now. Not right away."

Her eyes open wide in astonishment. "What?"

"Yes. I know. But I'm not ready. That's just the way it is," he mutters apologetically.

"And? Does Bíbí know that?"

He clears his throat. "Well. She's been talking about having a child for nearly two years. First I always said no, let's just wait a bit. Then I said nothing for about a year. Then all of a sudden she was pregnant, and there was nothing I could say. Or what?"

She shakes her head and sighs at the same time. "You're incredible. Say no more. Why are you so much against having a child?"

"I've got nothing against having a child, so to speak. I'm just not particularly fond of the world that it will be born into," he says philosophically as he pushes his sunglasses up his nose. "I just always think about the misery that our children are born into and I feel sorry for them because of the sad fates that inevitably await them. On the other hand, I always express my joy whenever someone is carried to the grave. I feel glad that that person is free from all the plagues of mortal life."

"Really!" She laughs joylessly. "Have you always been so fucking pessimistic?"

He shakes his head. "Disease, plagues, addiction, crime, war, genocide, power struggles, natural disasters and terrorism. Shall I continue? It takes more than cotton candy and a kiss on the cheek to deceive me. Pain and futility is all that's on offer, no matter what anyone says. Gratification here and laughter there doesn't change anything. Religion is a lie, politics is a lie, Hollywood is a lie. Life is an illusion, death is the truth. I'm not pessimistic. I'm realistic. I see the world simply as it is."

"Ugh! Your vision is pretty black, you can't deny," she says, forcing a smile.

He draws a deep breath through his nose. "That may well be true. But I don't want to lie to myself or others. I've always been of the opinion that a positive attitude is just the distress cry of the desperate."

He pauses, and then continues:

"On the other hand there's nothing wrong with it if people manage from time to time to find peace or harmony in a world that is inherently empty and cold and has little else to offer but injustice and tragedy."

She looks to the left and regards him for a brief moment, but says nothing.

Hörður holds the wheel with both hands and looks at the road, reflective, vapid, and focused.